

Collaboration: New Tools Drive Productivity, Add Value and Eliminate Boundaries

New collaboration tools are driving more-efficient interactions while reducing costs. By offloading the burden on e-mail and the telephone system, these new tools present more-effective ways to collaborate on documents and exchange ideas.



Can We Talk?

No one works in a vacuum. Human interaction is critical to the success of every business, in every part of the world. But the way we communicate can be costly, in both time and money.

E-mail boxes overflow. CCs and forwards fly from inbox to inbox. It takes up valuable server space – all for what is often a simple “yes” or “no” question. Meanwhile, voice mail, phone tag and ubiquitous conference calls soak up more time and resources.

At ACS, we believe there’s a way to work smarter and interact more effectively: by using collaboration tools such as My Colleagues, AD Synchronization and SharePoint tools. Imperative to a changing global marketplace, these tools can help you:

- Manage business processes
- Provide content management in a shared environment
- Save money and resources.

Smarter Collaboration

People interact in three basic ways: conversations, transactions and collaborations. The main difference is purpose:

- **Conversations** are for discovery and relationship building
- **Transactions** involve an exchange that changes the relationship between the two parties
- **Collaboration** is a totally different animal, where the main function is to alter the collaborative entity and move it toward a common goal; it also tends to suffer the most from inefficient processes

We’re testing and measuring the effectiveness of a wide variety of collaboration tools within our own organization. By becoming our own pilot, we’re accumulating data to offer our clients a clear recommendation for their own needs and budgets – and the expected return.

This process also enables us to identify the most effective means of changing user behavior. This factor is as critical to a program’s success as the collaboration tools themselves. As a company, we’re exploring the best training methodologies, as well as the best form of motivation.

Although implementing these collaborative tools requires a major shift in the corporate mindset, the payoff is well worth the effort: interpersonal relationships.

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We've identified the three different levels of collaborative interactions: communication, conferencing and collaboration. And we've earmarked tool sets that bring efficiencies to each.

Real-Time Communication.

One employee has a quick question for another. For example, "When do we expect to have report X finished?" He or she picks up the phone, sends an e-mail, or, if in the same location, physically gets up and heads to the other person's office. The phone call could result in a time-consuming game of phone tag. An e-mail could take up valuable server space and delay response. Physically leaving an office puts a stop to productivity – all for what should be a relatively simple answer.

These types of transactions are best suited for text messaging using one's phone or instant messaging via PC. The answer comes quickly, server space is saved, and already overtaxed e-mail and voicemail inboxes are spared.

If this seems like a small thing, assume every one of your employees has 10 interactions of this type per day. The increase in productivity and reduction of storage-robbing e-mails could be significant.

Conferencing Made Virtual.

Conferencing refers to interactive work toward a shared goal, such as brainstorming on a project. Today, these interactions often occur as physical meetings, which can result in travel costs and time away from the office.

Video conferencing and web conferencing give participants more-efficient ways to interact – with visuals and virtual "face time" – without leaving their offices.

Blogs are also great sources for brainstorming and idea sharing. One advantage of blogs is that they know no time zone. A global team can share thoughts whenever a spark of brilliance hits them. Blogs also become a source of social interaction in a virtual workplace, so employees can continue to build relationships without physical shared space.

A New Approach to Team Work Spaces.

What type of project can benefit from new collaboration tools? Projects that involve multiple team members, where each contributes a different piece of that project (such as creating documents with multiple authors). For that matter, any initiative that requires multiple departments to interact can benefit from new collaboration tools.

For example, a team may be assembling a presentation and positioning paper on a proposed new product. The paper may include market research, engineering specifics, drawings, development cycle, launch strategy and ROI. Typically, this document will be routed from person to person for input, and then back through for edits and approvals. Not only does the process waste server storage, but it's also not particularly productive. Often, wrong document versions head into circulation, and others wait in inboxes while the author is on vacation. Without a definitive way of knowing "who's on first" and "what's on second," the margin of error increases.

Instead of sending the document to individual authors, collaborative tools – such as Microsoft SharePoint – centralize document management. These tools include document check-in and check-out, as well as versioning. As a result, everyone knows who has the document, who has seen the document, and changes made. At the same time, collaboration and idea exchange are supported with discussion threads, and project management is made more efficient with group tasks and calendars.

Wikis also have become viable alternatives for gathering and organizing data from a large group of contributors. The same concept that made Wikipedia the online, multilingual, multi-contributor global resource can be scaled down and applied to corporations. It's a way for more-experienced workers to pass their insights on to newer employees. And it's a means for companies to perpetuate their knowledge base in a centralized information repository.

Web feeds, such as RSS, enable team members to get the individual information they need to do their job better. By subscribing to a content source that pushes new data, blog entries, headlines and podcasts to a read feeder on users' desktops, an employee can create his or her own data archive.

A World of Opportunity

By implementing the right combination of these collaborative tools, you can :

- Manage products more efficiently
- Increase productivity
- Streamline business activities.

As technology eliminates global boundaries, you can choose the best people with the right mix of talent, regardless of location, for each team. These tools could facilitate an entire virtual workforce. They are also critical in enabling your company to go "green" and:

- Make better use of its resources
- Shrink its carbon footprint
- Eliminate costs in the process.

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